

BAREND J. TER HAAR:

Practicing Scripture: A Lay Buddhist Movement in Late Imperial China. x, 298 pp. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. \$50. ISBN 978 0 8248 3927 7.
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Barend ter Haar's 1992 monograph *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* overturned the longstanding notion that these groups were anti-establishment rebels operating under a veneer of religiosity, as they were described in contemporary sources. Instead, by exploring the dynamics of fear, (mis)labelling, and religious regulation in China from the tenth to the twentieth centuries, ter Haar revealed the sharp disconnect between official records and self-understandings of religious groups, encouraging scholars not to take persecutory rhetoric at its word. In *Practicing Scripture*, ter Haar again leverages this type of critical insight to explore the Non-Action Teachings, a lay religious tradition strongly rooted in Buddhism, especially Chan/Zen, that arose around the sixteenth century and which persists today.

The book has a series of arguments at its core, each of which either illuminates a previously overlooked aspect of the Non-Action Teachings or applies insights from its history to the broader history of religious culture in modern China. Examining the history of the Non-Action Teachings opens a window into a seldom-seen stratum of traditional Chinese society, as its founders, leaders, and followers were neither the elite of society nor land-bound farmers (pp. 5–6). Instead they tended to be involved in military, mercantile or professional occupations that required basic literacy to deal with written materials, and which often entailed travel beyond their home locality. The ritual practices of the teachings amplified Buddhist injunctions and required participants to reject meat and alcohol, essential components of participation in Chinese ritual, and thus social life (p. 88). This, however, may have served to forge a stronger sense of identity and belonging to the group as a result. Rituals were focused on *Five Books in Six Volumes*, an anthology of texts believed to contain the essence of the Buddhist scriptural canon; yet reading this and other religious texts was not intended to interpret their message but rather to activate their power through ritual reading. The group's canon was thus more an object imbued with great numinous power rather than a source of discursive data. Such an approach to texts was critical of the entire Classicist tradition of learning, and supported by the adoption of Chan notions relating to a "transmission outside the scriptures" (pp. 29–35; 219–22).

While some monks are mentioned in the movement's writings, the group consisted almost exclusively of laypeople. Ethical teachings were an intensified version of those encouraged for lay Buddhists, and in at least one instance the highest levels of leadership took on aspects of monastic life, including celibacy and ritual clothing (pp. 8; 178). Contrary to previous academic interpretations, the Non-Action Teachings were neither messianic nor rebellious; such connections as there were to more violent religious movements were exceedingly tenuous, and violent episodes were rare (pp. 121–9). The various regional groups evolved and innovated over time, gradually shifting from a movement centred on charisma-led revelation towards a routinized and regulated religious structure. Such transformations involved a lively and fascinating dispute over who should inherit control of the lineage: whether recognition of a religiously-anointed successor was required, or whether leadership should automatically pass down the familial line. It also adopted the transmission of short, esoteric texts, the "True Sūtras without characters", to confirm induction into the community (pp. 131–4; 152–60). For much of its history the

movement was largely organized into regional networks with some communication and travel between them; it did not achieve a trans-regional character until the beginning of the twentieth century and the dawn of a national urban culture in China (pp. 176; 222–5). Finally, ter Haar devotes part of the concluding chapter to a comparison of the text-focused, iconophobic Non-Action Teachings and the rise of the Reformation in Europe, one that is thankfully neither centred on Europe as the normative case for religious development, nor claiming a unique exceptionalism for Chinese religious history.

Practicing Scripture has several key strengths and one pervasive weakness, but the latter is certainly not severe enough to blunt the message of the book. One strength is the especially rich account of the early charismatic leaders of the movement, whose biographies became central religious narratives of the later tradition. These characters operated in a tumultuous space of religious competition, constant threat, and social unrest of the period surrounding the Ming–Qing dynastic transition of the mid-seventeenth century. These narratives illustrate the importance of personal experiences in the received religious tradition, experiences of suffering, and persecution, but also of securing the support of powerful patrons and recognition of the leader's numinous power. Another strength is ter Haar's precision and care in interpreting sources that range from prisoner confessions to Buddhist anti-heretical polemics. Consistently drawing the reader's attention to the biases behind these narratives, while treating each source as valuable on its own merits, the range of sources in this study supports this approach by providing a number of angles to illuminate the subject. This is particularly effective when dealing with the overtly hostile materials produced through religious persecutions. Another example is the picking apart of materials relating to a massacre of missionaries in 1895. The analysis transforms what appears to be an act of religious violence into a much more nuanced, yet equally horrifying, episode in local struggles over power and authority (pp. 201–9).

The one weakness I can identify is that the sheer mass of material in this monograph is brought together in an uneasy coalition. In several places important concepts are briefly mentioned long before they are examined comprehensively, or introduced again long after they first appeared without reference to their earlier appearance. As mentioned above, however, this only makes it somewhat more challenging for non-specialists to digest its message. This is rather unfortunate since it calls scholars to look beyond the largely monastic-led textual traditions that have so often formed the core matter of scholarly digestion, to glimpse the lived religious experiences of a laity that existed at neither margin of society. Were this approach more often taken up in the study of early-modern and modern religion, it would be a welcomed impact of this magisterial and landmark work.

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ROMAN MALEK, S.V.D.:

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It is both gratifying and mildly surprising to find that the ongoing series of volumes from the Monumenta Serica Institute under the editorship of Roman Malek devoted